Techniques of the Professional PICKPOCKET

Wayne B. Yeager

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TECHNIQUES OF THE PROFESSIONAL PICKPOCKET
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1

Introduction

Before 1987, I believed that picking pockets was a physical impossibility. There was simply no way that anyone, no matter how skilled, could actually retrieve a wallet from someone's hip pocket, without alerting the owner. That kind of stuff was all very fine for magicians' "volunteers," and the movies, but in the real world, only a hillbilly, a drunk, or a fool would fall for such a ruse, right? Wrong! I had the good fortune to be "enlightened" on the subject during a trip to Rome in 1987. Exactly ten minutes after my arrival, I was penniless, ticketless, and passportless.

During an excruciating day in police stations and travelers' check offices, I met many other

people who shared my plight, and I discovered that Rome is a favorite haunt of the skilled pickpocket. The main reason is because people are so preoccupied with admiring the treasures and valuables of Rome, and so lose themselves in the mystique and allure of the ancient city, they completely forget about their own valuables, which makes picking terribly easy. For this reason, Paris, London, New York and every other international tourist spot are all profitable locales for the professional "booster." But while these cosmopolitan cities are some of the perennial favorites, professional pickpockets are very versatile and can work anywhere, from Anchorage to Ankara, provided there is a crowd from which they may choose their "mark."

Picking pockets is an art that is literally thousands of years old. Of course, we can only guess at its exact origin, but it most likely began when people started sewing pockets onto their togas to deposit valuables, thus freeing their hands. Soon afterwards, some clever thief discovered that if his hand moved quickly and with enough dexterity, those valuables could be his, with the previous owner being none the wiser. Through the centuries, the methods and techniques were becoming so refined, it became very dangerous to carry anything of value on your person. In Victorian England, pickpocketing was declared a capital offense, and it was hoped that public hangings would dissuade any young hopefuls from entering into that nefarious fraternity. Scotland Yard soon abandoned this initiative, however, when the

spectators at these hangings complained of missing wallets and watches.

Apparently, pickpocketing is no less popular today than it was in years past. In 1987, there were over 60,000 reported picked pockets in Paris alone. Kenneth Kleinlein of the New York Police Department's Special Frauds & Pickpocket Squad estimates that there are over a half million cases of pickpocketing in New York every year. Furthermore, Tokyo, a city considered to be very safe for the tourist and one that boasts of the honor of its citizens, reportedly loses about $60,000,000 annually to pickpockets.

Since my brush with pickpockets in Rome, I've done a lot of research, and accumulated a lot of information on pickpockets and their methods. In the beginning, my recurring questions were "Why do these people do this?" and "Why risk jail for such petty amounts?". But now, I've come to realize that pickpocketing is not only profitable and easy, but relatively safe as well. How profitable? A good pickpocket, that is, one who chooses his mark carefully, and is confident in his skills, can easily earn $200,000 to $300,000 a year. Did I say easily? Well, that depends on the individual, of course, but anyone can become a competent pickpocket if they know the techniques and practice them diligently.

The degree of professionalism and skill one possesses also plays a crucial role in determining the legal safety of the pickpocket. By taking precautions and by knowing when to abort a job, he

can decrease the odds of his being apprehended profoundly. And when you take into consideration the fact that only 25% of all pickpockets are ever apprehended, and that the legal rules of evidence make it all but impossible to convict a pickpocket, I would say that he is, legally speaking, fairly safe. Some states have passed laws against "jostling" in an attempt to deter and catch would-be thieves during the actual picking process, but it is a bit hard to enforce a law against bumping into people, especially with the specter of false arrest charges in the back of every officer's mind. In any event, the professional pickpocket will retain a good bondsman, for instant cash, and an attorney to request repeated continuances, in an attempt to exhaust and discourage the victims from pressing charges.

Members of most other criminal disciplines look down upon the pickpocket, and see him as a member of the lowest echelon of thieves. But in reality, few illicit trades offer the individual as much independence and reward as pickpocketing does. The reason for this, I believe, is that the success of the pickpocket depends entirely upon his own skill, and not on various uncontrollable circumstances, such as those that control the professional burglar or the drug dealer.

The information contained in this book has been gleaned from many different sources, such as policemen, magicians, professional pickpockets, and others, as well as every scrap of literature that has ever been written on the subject. As eclectic as these sources are, my combin-

ing them has resulted in this comprehensive guide to pickpocket methodology. Of course, this isn't a textbook for the aspiring pickpocket, but rather a guide that allows us to see their tricks, and use countermeasures against them. We don't have to condone the activities of the pickpocket to respect their prowess and dexterity. But after studying their techniques, I believe you will learn to appreciate, as I now do, the mastery and skill with which they perform their light-fingered swindles.

2

The Pickpocket

The modern pickpocket is, if need be, a professional actor, articulate conversationalist, a skilled thief, not a bumbling fool, as he is so often portrayed by Hollywood. He is well dressed and inconspicuous, can readily blend into any crowd, and has an ease of manner that lends him an air of confidence. Or, sometimes the pickpocket is a woman, and with a blend of charm, good looks and sophistication, she, too, completely escapes suspicion.

In police parlance, the pickpocket (male or female) is a "tool" or "dip." He may work alone, in which case he's a "single," but also may work in conjunction with "stalls," people who manipulate

and divert the mark into proper picking situations. These stalls may also provide cover for the pickpocket when he is doing his work if he is out in the open. For example, a stall may spread a newspaper to its full width while riding a bus or train so that the lifter can remove the contents of a nearby purse or pocket without being seen.

Another employee that a pickpocket might consider is called a "runner." his job appropriately enough is to take the goods and run with them. The wallet, watch, etc., is usually handed to him surreptitiously immediately after the lift so that the goods won't be found on the pickpocket if he gets "pinched." The pickpocket will also generally have connections with several "fences" so that he may unload any valuable non-cash items. Pickpockets typically receive 30-40% of the face value of travelers checks and about 25% of the wholesale value for jewelry.

Pickpockets and purse snatchers are sometimes spoken of as if they were one and the same. But a pickpocket is not a strong-armed and looks disdainfully upon the brute who has to resort to such violence. Pickpocketing is a finesse job, and there is no room in this criminal discipline for anyone who lacks decorum. That's not to say that there aren't people who are both pickpocket and purse snatcher, as evidenced by the gypsies of Rome and Paris. But these gypsy children are arrested so often that they obviously don't succeed in plying their trade by finesse but rather by sheer volume.

Although it may seem that the pickpocket leads a very emancipated lifestyle he is in fact constrained by some of the same parameters that bind us. For example the pickpocket must work hard for a living and while his occupation may allow for a less structured time schedule he is, nevertheless, pushed to pull as many hoists as he possibly can. Furthermore his job dictates that he must reside in a large urban center since he must have access to large crowds and cannot live in a community where he is known by people who regularly see him. Apart from these restrictions, the professional pickpocket leads a life of pecuniary nonconformity with the rewards bound only by his own skill and courage.

3

Why Pockets Can Be Picked

It is a little known psychological rule that we can only concentrate on one thing at a time. The disastrous pattern of our thoughts. It gives the illusion that we are cognizant of two distinct thoughts simultaneously, but it is simply not true. The business man running to catch his flight, the gambler anxiously watching his horse coming down the stretch, and the man hurrying off the subway, all have only one immediate aim in mind. Their minds are all preoccupied with their short term goal, and are oblivious to any outside distractions. That is why the accidental "collision" perpetrated by the pickpocket goes almost unnoticed. Haven't you experienced this "tunnel vision" at one time or another? Haven't there been

times when you are suddenly "awakened" from an almost dream-like trance to find yourself back in reality. It is this psychological fact that facilitates the pickpocket's operations.

It is also a little known fact that the sensation derived from a greater force nullifies that of a lesser force. To illustrate this example, while sitting down, hit yourself with a pencil on one leg and simultaneously punch yourself hard on the other leg. You barely even felt the pencil right. As a matter of fact, the only reason you did feel it is because you had previous knowledge that you were going to hit yourself with it. Now if someone were to hit you with a hammer on one leg, while you punched yourself on the other, the blow of the hammer would certainly supersede that of your fist because you would feel only the dominant force. You need to perform the second half of this experiment — take my word for it. It is these two psychological laws that the pickpocket exploits to achieve his ends.

Realizing this, we can immediately see that the pickpocket can only operate under the right circumstances. These circumstances will present themselves when there is pushing and shoving, and when people's minds are on other things. The typical bumping and scraping of an arrow is the measure for the right fingered thief. This allows him to appear as a normal "bumper and scraper," while he fulfils his ulterior actions under this guise.

The pickpocket begins by coming with the mark. During the moment of impact the hand dips

down into the pocket of the mark, while the fold of the collision serves to deaden and cover the pickpocket's actions. Of course, we will cover this in more detail later, but sufficient to say that this is the typical procedure in most lifts. As a matter of fact, whenever you hear of anyone having their pocket's picked, it almost invariably occurred in a crowd, right?

Most people believe that they can tell whether or not their wallet has been tampered with. They claim that if it were missing, they would notice the irregular feeling of the billfold not being in its proper place. Well, while most people carry their wallet in the same place for years, and grow accustomed to the feel of having it there, the mind disallows us, as stated above, to think about the wallet's position when we're thinking of something else. This can be proven through another experiment.

Put your wallet in a pocket other than the one that ordinarily holds it, and leave it there for the rest of the day. Now later in the day, if you were to go to something, your hand would instinctively go to the usual wallet pocket. But wait, it's not there! And for a second or two, there is extreme panic and fear that the wallet is missing. Of course, in a few seconds, you will pat down the other pockets and discover the wallet, but what can we observe from this little demonstration? That not only did we still believe our wallet was in its usual place, even though we had deliberately moved it, but also that we were obviously only aware of the

so-called strange feeling of a misplaced wallet while we were consciously thinking about it.

There is an old and true saying among pickpockets that "You can't steal a man's money as long as he has his mind on it." Therefore the pickpocket's favorite situation is when the victim is concentrating on other things and has forgotten himself. If the mark is allowed to naturally take his mind off of his wallet—if only for a few seconds—he will be astonished to find that he was being robbed without the slightest disturbance.

4

The Mark

A pickpocket by definition requires a pocket to pick and the owner of said pocket is generally called the "mark." The mark certainly gets the short end of this arrangement for the pickpocket's objective is to take him for all he's got. As we will discuss the mechanics of the actual picking process later, it is now our immediate concern to reveal how the pickpocket selects his intended victim.

Since the pickpocket's ultimate goal is to realize as large a profit as possible, it follows that he should be on the lookout for any gentleman (or lady) who possesses a large amount of cash on their person. Or perhaps, if the pickpocket is a

watch spectator he will primarily concern himself with the brand and quality of the victim's timepiece. At any rate the pickpocket decides that the most fruitful environment will be one where large amounts of money freely circulate. Therefore banks and racetracks are obviously pickpocket's picnics. At other times they will situate themselves near a teller's window so that they may observe any potential mark sporting a wad of cash. Other places such as ticket windows amusement parks movie theaters auctions and fairs are also full of people brandishing their wallets and pocketbooks thus allowing the observant pickpocket an glimpse of so many.

Busy last minute Christmas shoppers are another dream come true for the pickpocket. Not only are they usually loaded with cash but they are completely absorbed in finding the perfect last minute gift for Uncle Charlie. Some merchants during the Christmas holidays department stores will display various signs that carry a general "Beware of Pickpockets" theme. Paradoxically this aids the pickpocket who stands near the sign as the readers of the sign invariably check their wallets to make certain they are still there. Not only does the pickpocket now know where the intended mark keeps his loot but the victim will have conveniently forgotten all about the sign in a matter of minutes. Similarly some pickpockets will allow themselves to be heard whispering the word "pickpocket" to an accomplice during a conversation. The immediate reaction of any bystander hearing this is to feel for his wallet which

immediately informs the "tool" as to where it is kept.

It should be noted, too, that drunks make deliciously simple targets, but rarely do they carry a great deal of cash. Prostitutes are notorious for putting a few drops of chloral hydrate into the mark's drink so that when he passes out, in the bar or a hotel, he can be relieved of his valuables with ease.

The above-mentioned marks are of the spontaneous variety, meaning that they are usually picked at random from the crowd on the basis that they "may" be carrying a lot of cash. However, there are cases where the pickpocket watches the intended mark for days until he is quite sure that he is carrying worthwhile goods. We will call these, for future reference, "previously observed marks." These are generally businessmen or managers who take daily deposits to the bank, or one who, due to the nature of his business, does quite a bit of cash buying in other cities. Some pickpockets watch for a small business owner to close his shop because he may be taking the daily receipts home with him. Drug dealers are also a good example of the previously observed mark.

Anyone carrying large amounts of cash is a potential mark for the typical pickpocket. However, cash doesn't have to be the sole criterion of an intended victim. For example, there is a large demand for Western travel documents, and these are quite valuable commodities in the underground marketplace in a foreign country, and

especially one in the Eastern Bloc even if you are carrying no cash your passport may make you a likely target As I stated in the Introduction, this is a practice with which I am unfortunately familiar

5

The Diversion

Whenever a potential mark is "out in the open" or when circumstances arise that would prevent the pickpocket's actions from being disguised by the jostling of a crowd, a tool will most likely resort to one of the various diversions. A successful diversion accomplishes two important things: first, it misdirects the mark's attention and thus keeps his mind off of his wallet; and second, it delivers a small disorienting force that puts the mark off balance, and allows any unusual movement caused by the wallet extraction, to go unnoticed.

These diversions are as varied as the men who employ them, and range from the simple one man variety to the complex six handed mob diversion

Women "dips" are generally quite adept at exploiting their sexuality to accomplish a successful diversion. It is not uncommon for a female pickpocket to "accidently" rub her buttocks or breast against a mark and so thoroughly distract him that he can be relieved of his valuables without any trouble.

It would obviously be impossible to offer a complete list of every possible diversion since most are altered slightly to conform to the requirements of each pickpocketing mission. I will, however, attempt to detail the more popular varieties of ruses being used today.

The "Oops" Variety

This variety requires the pickpocket to spill something (preferably hot) on the mark. The pretense of helping the mark clean himself offers an excellent opportunity for the thief to do his own type of "cleaning." In some cities it is a very popular trick to squirt catsup out of those little packages onto the mark's clothing. When the pickpocket is begging forgiveness for his clumsiness, the mark is robbed of his loot. Some pickpockets take a similar although vulgar approach by spitting on the victim, and then quickly take the victim's goods during the apology. I've always wondered, though, how one appropriately apologizes for spitting on another person.

The "May I Help You" Approach

Under the guise of aiding a fellow human being, a pickpocket can easily slip the wallet from the fellow human being's pocket. Older men are especially susceptible to this ruse since they may actually require help, which completely allays suspicion, and because their reactions as a rule are less sensitive than younger men. Another favorite strategy is for the pickpocket to point to a previously planted item on the ground and tell the mark that he dropped it. As he goes to pick it up, someone else (an unidentified confederate, of course) steps from the crowd to claim the cash. During the ensuing argument, the pickpocket relieves the hapless victim of money that really did belong to him. Another old favorite, especially in Rome, requires the pickpocket to puncture the tire of the tourist's rental car. When the pickpocket or team of pickpockets offers to help, the trunk of the car is opened to get the spare. But before the mark can say "grazie," the pickpockets are zipping down the road with the mark's luggage.

The "Have Pity On Me" Approach

While this tactic is relatively rare, it can be very effective when done properly. An extremely disfigured or crippled man comes up to a potential mark in a wheelchair or on crutches. Now it is a

known fact that healthy people will "consciously" avoid looking a handicapped person in the eye and as the victim is busy pretending not to notice the disfigured person, he can be easily robbed. I have also heard about people wearing artificial broken arm casts that contain a phony arm, so that their real arms are left to explore nearby pockets at will.

The "How Could I Possibly be a Pickpocket?" Variety

The success of this diversion relies on the pickpocket's acting abilities, since he will be playing a very dramatic role. One method entails dressing as a clergyman, doctor or a member of some other profession beyond reproach and cleaning the victim during a "professional" discussion. This variety would also include the famous "Mary Ellen" workers. This is usually a mob of three or four pickpockets that frequent red light districts and stagger around like they are extremely drunk. When they see a pair of gentlemen who look fairly prosperous, they will hover over them, trying them about a fascinating woman they have just met. And as drunks are excessively friendly to strangers, and have a tendency to put their arms around the person they're talking to, they go around pulling this stunt completely without suspicion. So, while they are telling the marks about the incredibly well-endowed Mary Ellen, they surreptitiously slip the wallets from the marks' pockets.

The "Surprise!" Tactics

You may have noticed that of the variety of diversions listed above most of them require a bit of planning and forethought. But of course there are times when a pickpocket sees a mark and has absolutely no time to plan a diversion. Therefore he must rely on his spontaneity to deliver a successful distraction.

One of the more common varieties of this spontaneous diversion is the "bully" approach. A pickpocket will knock the hat or glasses off a mark or perhaps knock a briefcase out of his hand seemingly by accident. This will serve to both infuriate and disconcert the victim so that his wallet can be easily taken. Or the pickpocket may follow the mark to his car and then at the last minute yell, "Hey, get out of my car!" After the pickpocket is satisfied that he was mistaken and after the appropriate apologies he will walk away but not without the mark's billfold.

Another spontaneous ruse compels the pickpocket to sneak up behind the mark, put his hand over the victim's eyes and say, "Guess Who?" At the same time the contents of his pockets are also removed. When the victim turns around angrily the pickpocket appears mortified and extremely embarrassed and explains that he thought the victim was his brother, father, cousin, etc., and walks hurriedly away. Another technique that I have seen requires the pickpocket to throw something at the mark. It can be a baseball, suitcase, baby, or anything intended to be caught. This

technique obviously requires a team, however since a confederate must do either the picking or the throwing, but cannot do both.

The above diversions are but a few of the endless tricks in the professional pickpocket's repertoire. The publication of the samples listed above may serve to make these particular techniques obsolete but when new ones are invented, and invented they will be, they will almost certainly belong to one of the five distinct varieties cited.

6

The Pants Pockets

We will now examine the mechanics of the actual picking procedure and will concern ourselves in this chapter with extractions from the pants pockets. Of course the first order of business is determining exactly where the wallet is located. After a small survey I've come to the conclusion that most men carry their wallets in the right hip pocket. My survey was a very regional one, of course, so this may not be universally true, but wherever the wallet is, it is generally easily seen bulging out of one of the back pockets or "sucker" pockets, as they're called by members of the profession. Very rarely is anything of value except car keys and cigarette lighters kept in the front pockets, but the methods for dipping into

them are included for good measure. It is not unusual for a pickpocket to steal keys, especially hotel keys, as a means to a further end.

The next order of business is determining the way in which the wallet is lying. This may seem trivial and of no practical importance, but the position of the wallet usually dictates which extraction methods can and cannot be used. Most men carry their billfold "feet up," meaning the two ends of the wallet face upwards and the "fold" is facing down, or sometimes "feet down," which is exactly the feet up position turned upside down. It is rare indeed for a man to place his wallet sideways in the pocket, but if someone has almost none of the lifting methods described on the following pages will work. Rather, the pickpocket will be forced to resort to the "sailing" or cutting methods described. A bifold wallet is almost always placed in a pocket with the seam at the bottom and the opening at the top. If it is placed in any other position, the pocket will have to be slit. Finally, the checkbook type billfold is always placed in its rectangular shape, parallel in the pocket with the narrow end parallel to the ground.

The first and most common method of wallet extraction is the "two finger snag." Standing behind the mark, the pickpocket makes a "V" with his index and middle finger and inserts them slightly into the pocket (see Figure 1). A pickpocket describes this: "Your fingers are in the pocket, but yet they aren't. The fingers are in well enough to touch the wallet, but not so much that they obviously feel alien to the owner." During the

confusion the diversion or other distraction the pickpocket snags the wallet and jerks it out This is not done gingerly or timidly but quickly and forcefully A variation of this calls for the tool to manipulate the wallet to the top of the pocket somehow, where he can snag it later (see Figure 2)

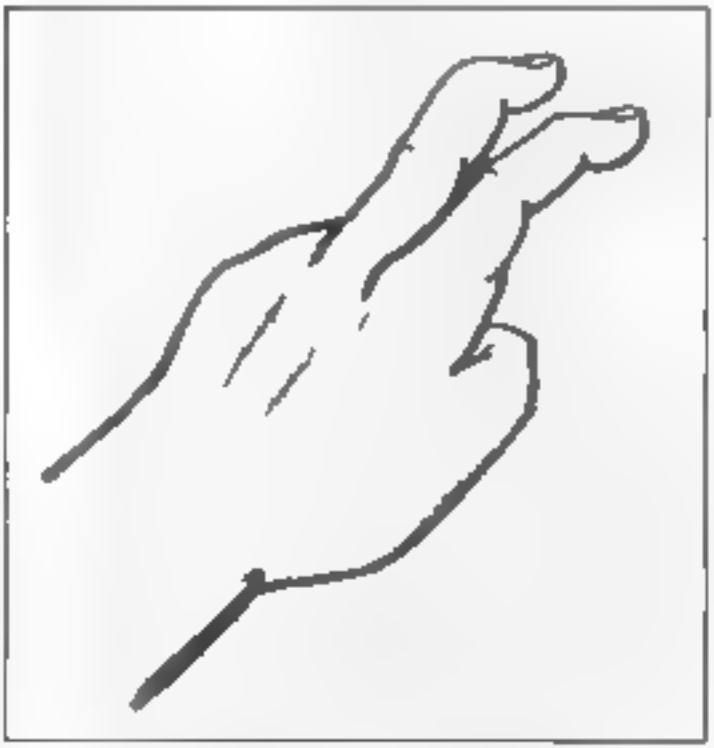


Figure 1

For the two-finger snag, the index and middle finger are held slightly apart.

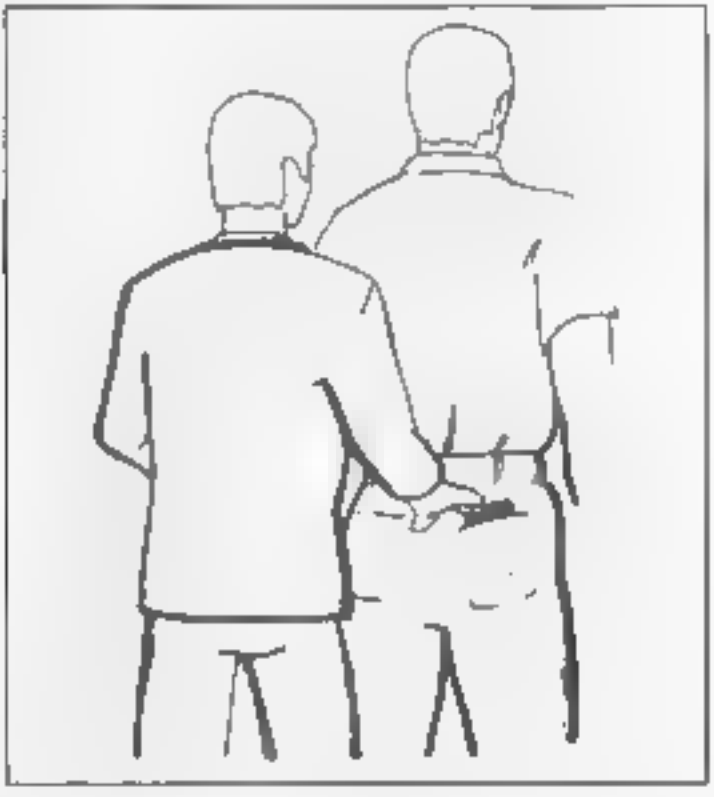


Figure 2

A wallet that has been previously maneuvered to the top of the pocket is about to be snagged.

Another favorite trick of the pickpocket is to knee the mark just below the wallet (see Figure 3), and, at the same time he raises the billfold so that the top protrudes from the pocket (Figure 2 He

then grabs the piece of the wallet showing, and holds it firmly while the mark walks away from it

Figure 3

A pickpocket uses his knee to raise the mark's wallet

It slips right out of the pocket without the mark feeling it. A dip also may grab the ends of the wallet while standing flat footed, he holds his

hand stuff while he slowly raises himself on his toes. This is done during the course of the diversion or the bumping of a crowd so that the victim is unaware of any unnatural movements.

Another way of stealing from the back pocket is called "pushing." This means that over the course of a long waiting period his wallet, for example, the wallet is slowly nudged upwards an inch at a time until it eventually rises out of the pocket. An ex-pickpocket explains "I've got to push it every so often and show him your hands after every big push. You don't want to say 'Hey look at my hands' but you have to get your hands be seen so he don't get suspicious." Sometimes this method is required on marks that are wearing tight pants because the two fingers straight will feel no matter how bad the jostling of the crowd may be. It is also necessary sometimes to deliver an extreme blow to the mark to accompany a steal from a tight pocket. As a rule however pickpockets tend to avoid anyone with very tight pants for obvious reasons.

It must be stated that the above techniques must be done very rapidly and without hesitation. It may sound untrue but actually there is a smaller chance of getting caught by jerking the wallet out than there is by trying to finesse it out. The only time a slow meticulous wallet steal would be attempted is when the pockets are very loose such as those on the back of sweat pants, and the billfold can be taken without the actions being felt.

The last method of stealing from the back pocket is called "slitting." Half a razor blade is taped to thick tape so as to make a handle and the sharp end is used to cut the pants pocket (see Figure 4). Many pickpockets actually cut a square in the pocket so that the wallet simply falls out.

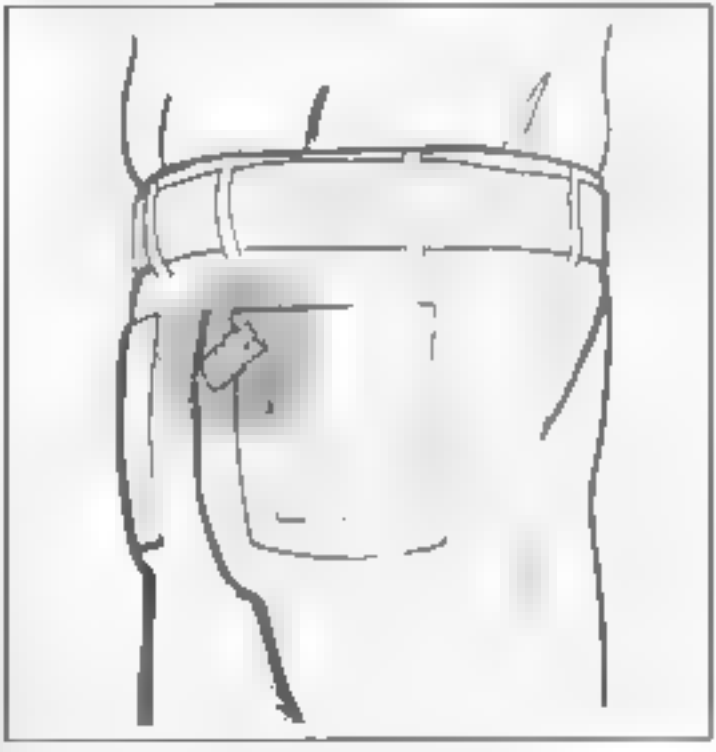


Figure 4

Using a razor blade to cut the wallet out of the mark's pocket

but there is a much more efficient method. Using a pair of small wire cutters, the topstitch of the back pocket is snipped (see Figure 5). The pick

pocket then uses the razor to slice the pocket right down the middle (see Figure 6). If the wallet doesn't fall out, it can certainly be lifted out without complications. The beauty of this trick is

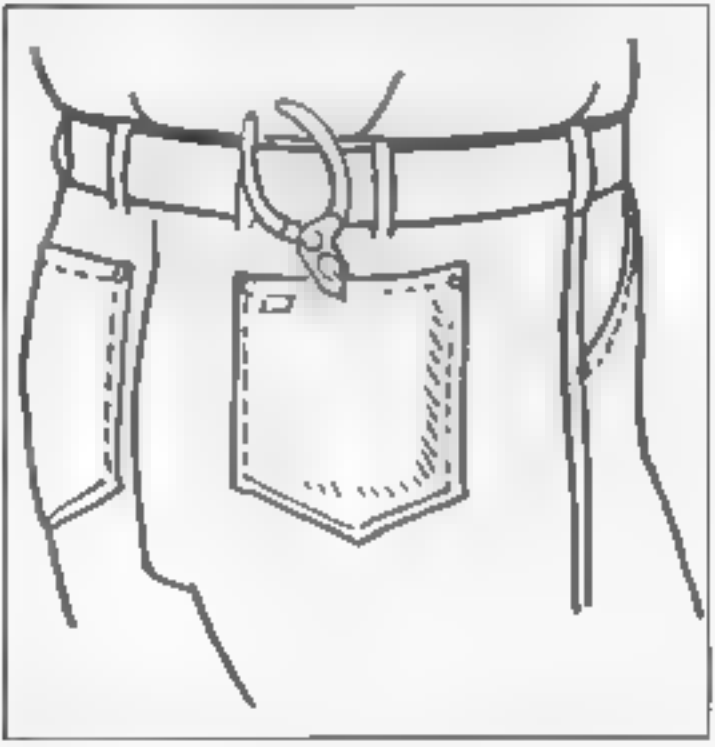


Figure 5

Another method for cutting the pocket begins with snipping the heavy topstitching with a pair of wire cutters.

that the razor rests upon the wallet during the cutting procedure therefore the mark never feels a thing The reason the topstitch is snipped with a wirecutter is because it is very quick and because it is usually too thick to cut easily with a razor blade Wirecutters are also indispensible

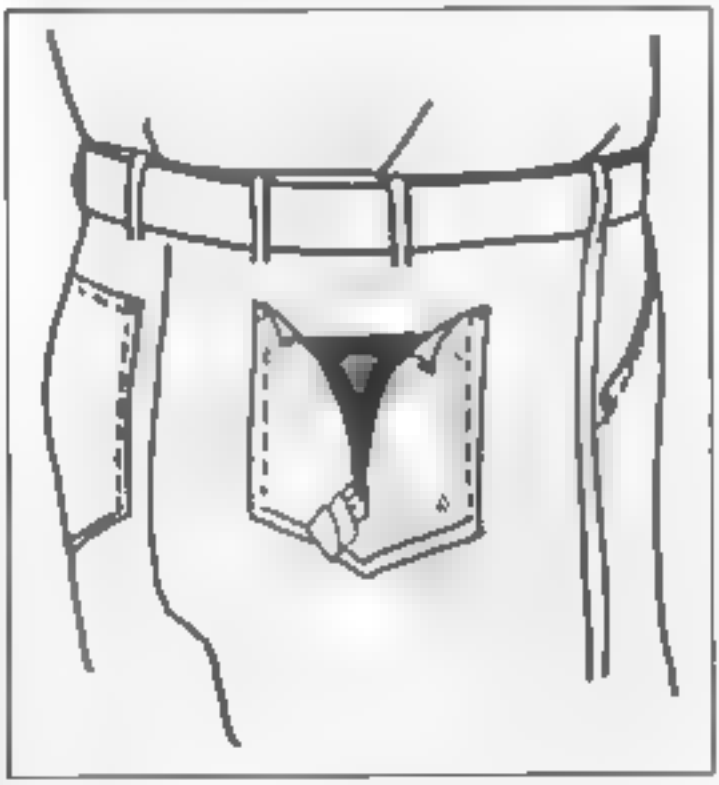


Figure 6

After the topstitch is cut, the pocket is slit right down the middle

when confronting a wallet chained to the owner's belt loop, the type so popular among truck drivers. Slitting is especially necessary when a pocket is protected by a button or a buttoned flap. The thread of the button is easily cut, and the flap can simply be sliced away.

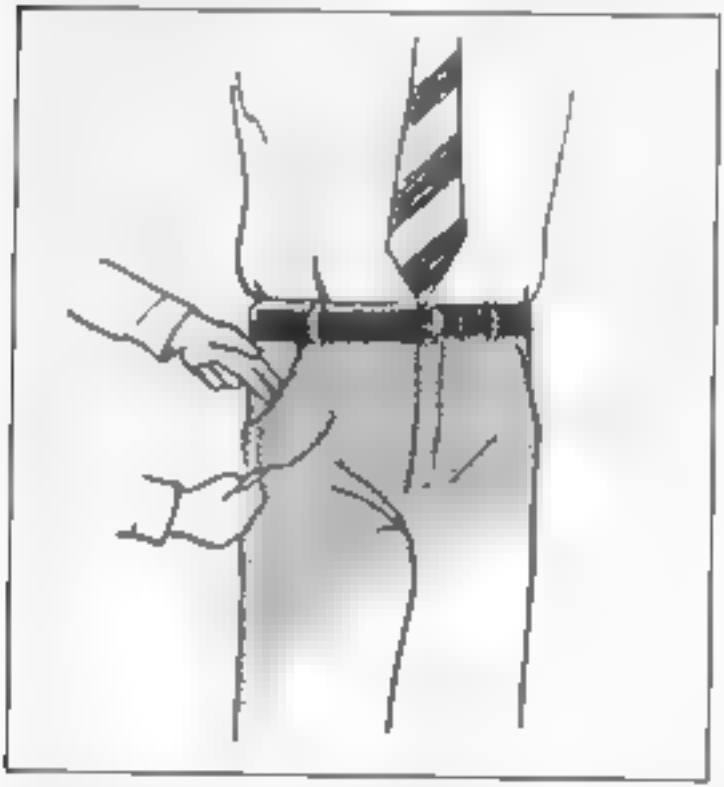


Figure 7

Slitting can also be used on the front pockets. The bottom of the pocket is cut open while the mark's attention is diverted.

Figure 8

Reefing is a method for removing the contents of the mark's pocket by pulling on the pocket string.

Slitting is also a very popular method of gaining access to the front pocket. The mark's attention is usually diverted to the opposite direction and a neat crescent shape is cut at the bottom of the pocket (see Figure 7). Any contents will fall through the hole (unless, of course, the pants are skin tight). The other method of stealing from the

front pocket is called "reefing." The thumb and forefinger are placed barely into the front pocket and a series of small lifts create tiny pleats in the pocket (see Figure 8). After several such lifts, the pocket will be turned almost inside out, and the contents will be revealed for easy picking. It is obvious that reefing is not a very quick method, since it takes many small folds to turn a pocket inside out, but it still should take no more than a minute to consummate this act.

Before closing this chapter, we should take notice of the difficulties that the pickpocket sometimes encounters when lifting wallets. Sometimes a coat, jacket or poncho will cover the pockets and make lifting from them difficult. This hindrance is easily removed by either lifting or cutting the outer garment. "We were working a state fair one weekend," explains a former pickpocket, "when it started to rain. So this guy starts selling these little rain ponchos, and in an hour everybody was wearing one. We couldn't get to anybody's back pocket, so we all went and bought razor blades so that we could cut holes in them. At the end of the day, everywhere you looked there were guys walking around with holes cut out of their rain coats. It was kind of funny, but I was sorry we had to resort to such crude methods."

Another difficult situation arises when the mark is aware that something strange is going on and gets suspicious. If the tool has completed the lifting procedure, just as the mark is turning around, he will throw the wallet to the floor, and

quickly bend over to pick it up, saying, "I believe you dropped this." If the mark detects the invasion before the lift is completed, the pickpocket will either apologize for bumping into him, or tell him he thought he was someone else. If the mark insists that he was trying to pick his pockets, the smart tool will usually run like a madman and never show his face there again.

7

The Jacket Pockets

The average sports coat or jacket has four pockets of interest: the two hand pockets, the inner pocket, and the breast pocket. Obviously the outer pockets would be terribly simple to pick since they are away from the body and can be explored with ease. And sometimes flaps are just sewn on to the jacket to give the appearance of pockets. When actually there is no pocket at all. Like the outer breast pocket, they rarely carry anything of value; therefore we will not bother to study them. So our only concern here is the methods used to steal from the inner coat pocket.

Since the inner coat pocket is not pressed against the body as of the time, it is much easier to steal from it than it is from the hip or "sucker

pocket. A pickpocket rarely bothers to attempt a steal from the inner jacket pocket unless he has seen a wallet or something valuable there. If, however, he sees no wallet is in the back pocket, he reasons that the wallet is in the coat, and thus prepares for a "coat lift."

His first mission is to determine on which side the wallet lies. Most modern jackets have an inner pocket on both sides of the coat; therefore a bit of probing or "fanning" must be done. One method of fanning is to accidently run into the mark and with palms out, pushing by against the inner pockets. This should reveal the location of the wallet. Another ruse is to ask the mark if he can change a twenty, or if he has five ones. If these methods are too impractical, the pickpocket will just look closely when the mark sits down or stands up to see if he can detect it. Or, as a professional pickpocket tells me: "A left-handed man will usually use the right inner pocket, while a right-handed will use the left pocket." After a small survey of my own, I've come to the conclusion that this is generally correct.

The secret of stealing from the inner coat pocket is misdirection. Since the inner pocket steal is usually a frontal attack, it is necessary to divert the attention, and thus turn the head of the victim, so that he cannot catch a peripheral glimpse of the pickpocket's activities. Figure 9 is a typical inner coat pocket lift. This is done by lightly lifting the coat by the lapel, and worming the fingers into the coat pocket, all the while holding the jacket away from the body. Obviously this requires a partner to supply the diversion.

Figure 9

As the pickpocket diverts the mark's attention, his right hand goes for the goods

A single pickpocket has a few options at his disposal as well. For example, he can spill some powder on the mark's shoulder (the side opposite the wallet) and tell him about it. As he brushes the powder off (see Figure 10), his arm will conceal any movement the pickpocket makes. This obviously must be done very quickly to be successful. The pickpocket may also pull a drunk routine, so

that he can run head on into the mark, called "kissing the dog" and let his body cover his actions.

Figure 10

As the mark brushes dirt off his jacket he provides cover for the nimble pickpocket.

Since the head of the victim must be turned or his vision blocked from the action, a pickpocket may use various surprise tactics where there is no time to plan a diversion. For example the pickpocket may say "Isn't that Madonna?" or some-

thing else that is likely to make the mark turn his head. A similar trick involves the pickpocket's ability to extemporize. He may point upward and say "That plane is going to crash!" or "Is that a UFO?" or "That man is going to jump!" or something else where the object is to make the victim look in the air. As long as the mark's head is turned his inner pocket can be cleaned although afterwards he will probably think the pickpocket is nuts. Also in a crowded elevator a woman may ask the mark to punch the button to a certain floor for her. If the mark makes a chivalrous lunge to oblige his jacket is left hanging open to display an easily taken billfold.

Finally, there are special occasions perfectly suited for the inner coat pocket steal. I have heard of at least one pickpocket who works a park in Connecticut during the Fourth of July festivities. During the fireworks when everybody's head is turned skyward—well you know the rest. I would think that similar circumstances of an air show or an eclipse would provide the same opportunity but then again how many people would wear a coat and tie to an air show or eclipse?"

8

The Watch

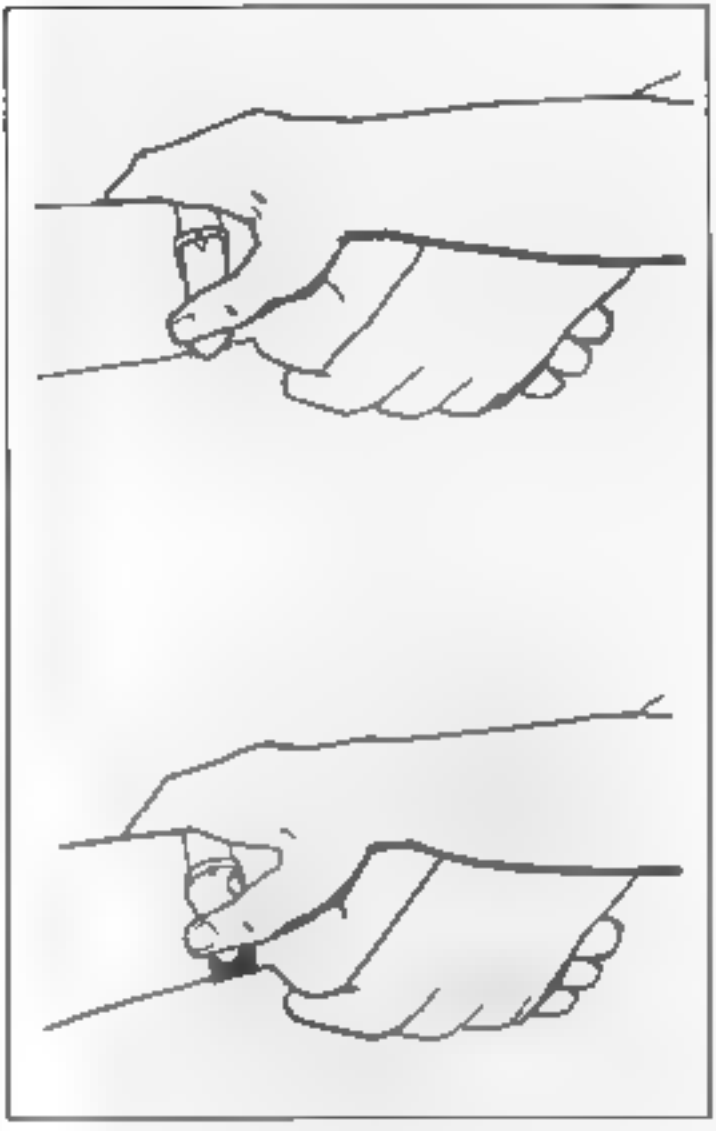
Of all the tricks and skills in the professional pickpocket's arsenal, the ability to steal watches right off the victim's arm is the most amazing. It sounds so fantastic that it seems impossible. But watches are stolen from the wrists of thousands of people annually, and this amounts to a multimillion dollar a year industry. One would think that only Cartiers, Rolexes and Patek Philipes would be the targets of these watch snatchers, but the Bulova, Seiko and even the Timex are stolen from time to time.

I see a lot of skeptical smiles out there, so let's try an experiment. Take your watch and lay it on your wrist. Don't bother to fasten the buckle or strap it around your wrist, but just lay it on top of

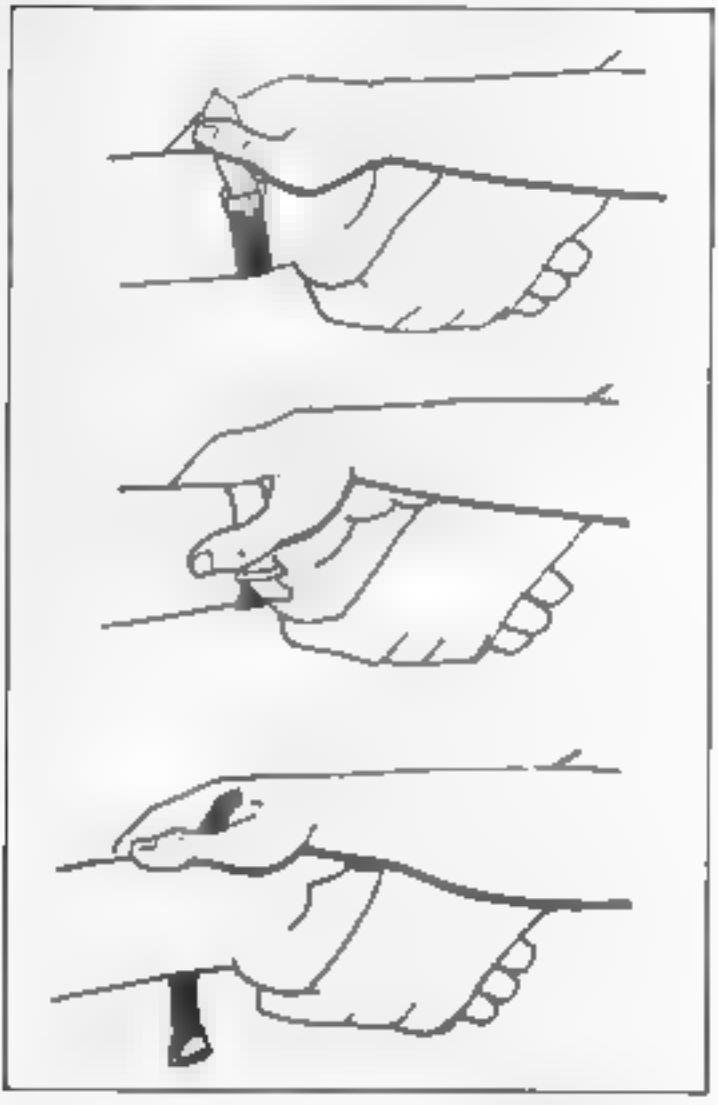
your wrist with your palms facing down. Now lay your other hand on top of the watch and press firmly for a second or two. Suddenly remove the watch and observe the sensation. It feels like the watch is still there doesn't it. If this is coupled with the typical misdirection or with an overpowering force such as a handshake the pickpocket can effect a steal quite simply.

The removal of a watch from a wrist is actually a series of very subtle movements, each carefully engineered to achieve a certain goal. It must be accomplished quickly and with a minimum of fumbling to work successfully. The pickpocket prefers to steal the leather strap variety since it is much easier to manipulate than the metal band. The pickpocket working with the leather band will try to cut it with a razor or a pair of small scissors whenever possible but will do an "unbuckle" if absolutely necessary. A skilled unbuckler can take your leather strap watch in about one second, so his main goal is diverting your attention.

The most common method of unbuckling occurs during a common handshake but the steal may also be perpetrated in a crowded area. The pickpocket will offer a left handed handshake (since that is where most people wear their watch) and grasp the wrist with his right. This is a fairly common practice so it is not a tremendously suspicious act. As he is looking one in the eye and saying, "How do you do?" he is doing the following routine:



Figures 11-12



Figures 13-15

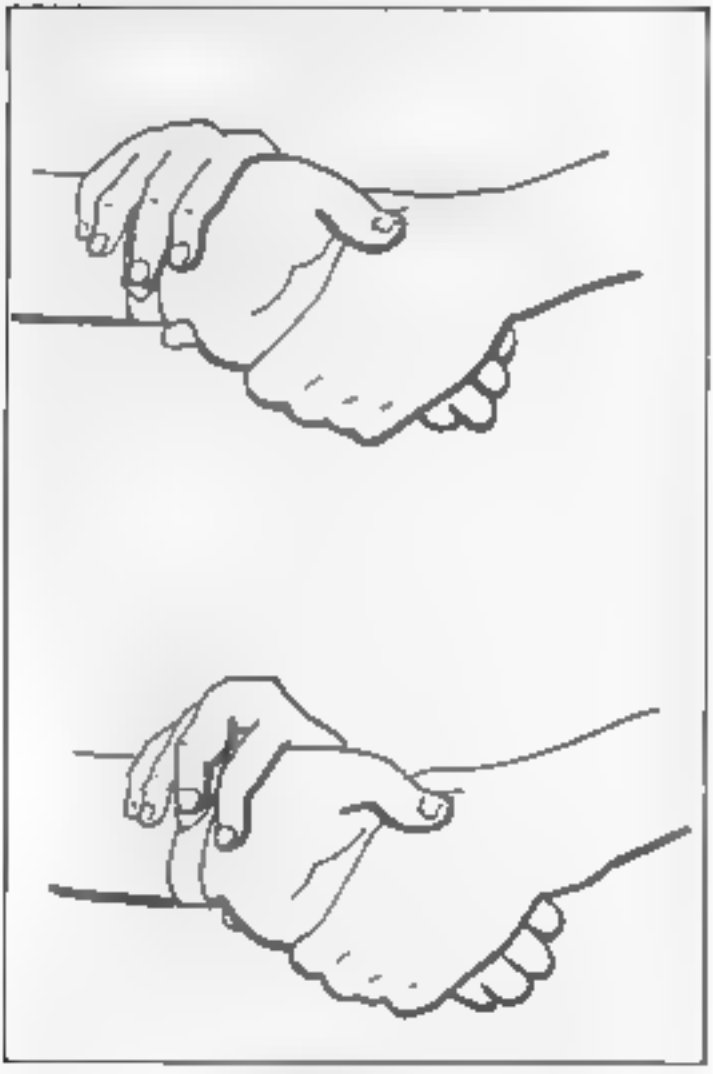
During the time it takes for a comfortable handshake the professional pickpocket can liberate a watch.

With his right hand on the wrist, he grabs the end of the strap (see Figure 11) and pushes it through the buckle (see Figure 12). Pulling it slightly releases the pin from the hole, and the thumb pushes the pin out of the way (see Figure 13). Using the thumb to push the buckle forward, the end of the strap will come out of the buckle (see Figure 14) and the watch is released from the arm (see Figure 15).

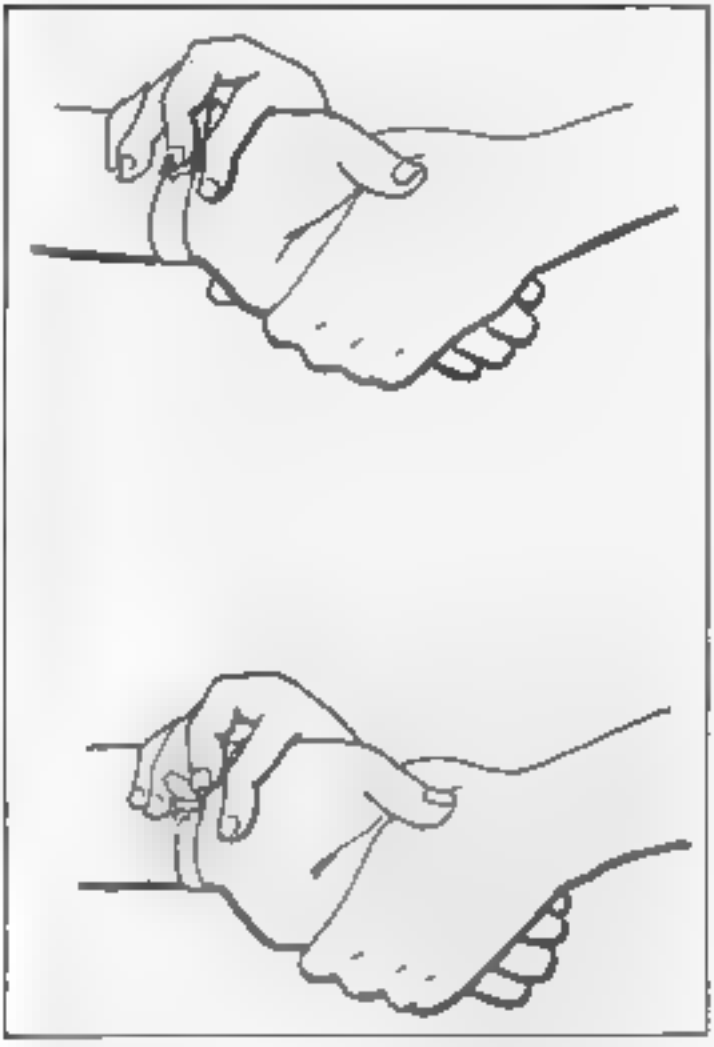
Another method uses the middle finger for the unbuckling procedure. The middle finger grasps the band (see Figure 16) and pulls it as far as possible (see Figure 17). The nail of the middle finger is used to flip the pin forward (see Figure 18), which allows the buckle to be pushed forward (see Figure 19) and the watch to be removed.

Pickpockets who specialize in boosting watches will often carry some sort of rosin in their pockets, as this reduces slippage and makes the unbuckling procedure go more smoothly. For the pickpocket who forgets his rosin, hairspray applied to the fingertips will do in a pinch.

Now that we've seen a couple of the techniques used to lift the leather strap variety, it is time we graduated to the granddandy of the watch steals, boosting a metal banded watch. Quick hitters, the subject of Chapter 9, will often cut the bands with a pair of wire cutters, but this is a bit crude and rarely escapes detection. The metal band can, surprisingly enough, be manipulated off the wrist. But unlike the leather band steal, the metal band has to come over the wrist and hand, which imposes special hazards and restrictions on the pickpocket.



Figures 16-17



Figures 18-19

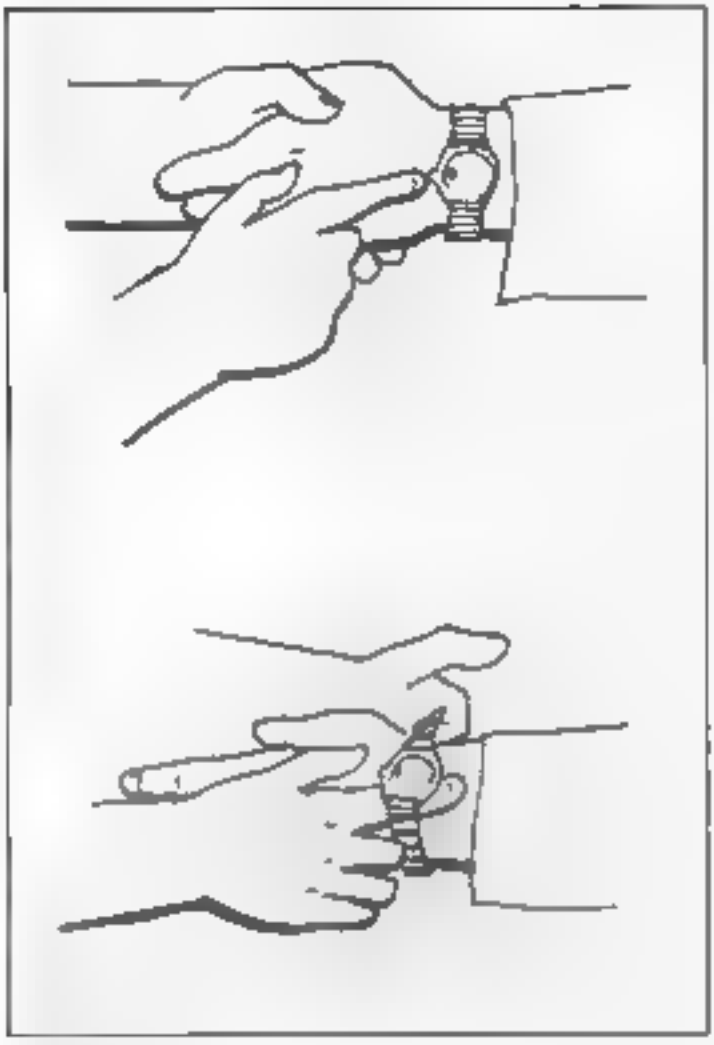
Another method for lifting a watch uses the middle finger rather than the thumb

As in the techniques cited above the pickpocket must resort to a left handed handshake. During the shake the right index finger goes under the watch (see Figure 20). Just as the hand shake is over the right index finger pulls out slightly to allow the middle finger, ring finger and pinky of the left hand to enter under the band (see Figure 21). Still holding the watch away from the wrist the middle finger, ring finger and pinky of the right hand slide inside the band (see Figure 22) and the watch band is stretched away from the wrist. Carefully but quickly the band is passed over the wrist and hand (see Figure 23) and is quickly deposited into the pocket. Of course. We slowed this procedure down considerably to show each movement, but during a real steal the entire operation is completed in less than a second so that the recipient of the unfated handshake is none the wiser.

Very often a skilled pickpocket will go for the cufflinks as well as the watch if they're valuable enough. But this display of covert daring is generally left to the quick hitter.

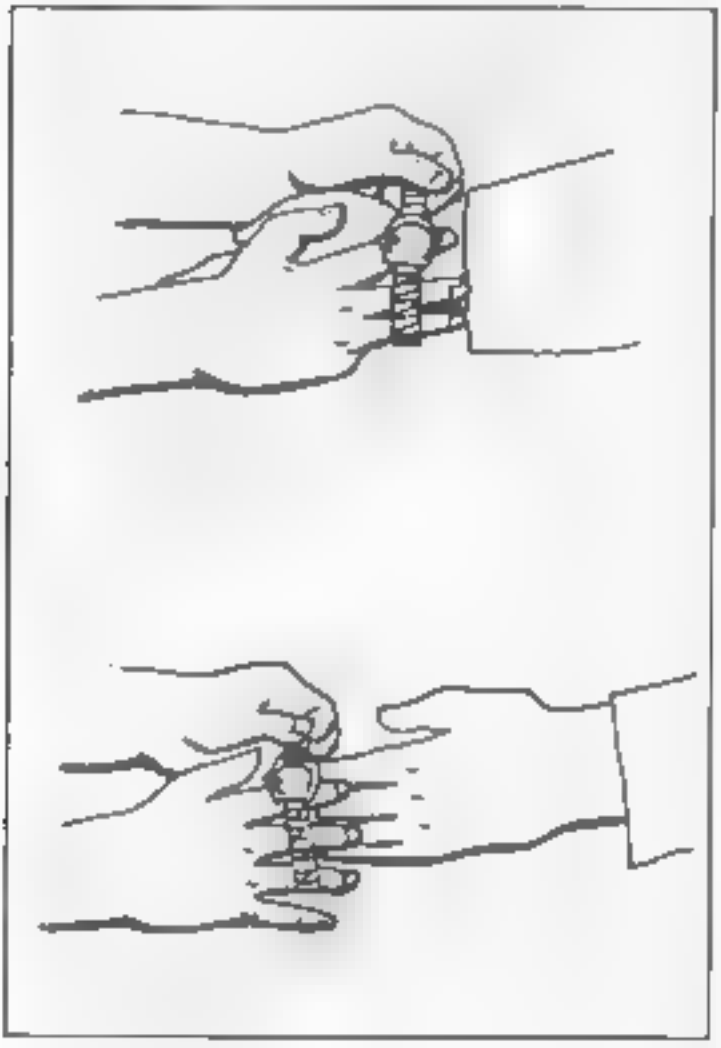
Unlike picking pockets, watch stealing is a discipline that requires a great deal of practice to perfect. Tools that are determined to add the watch lift to their bag of tricks find diligent practice a must.

The next chapter deals with how pickpockets practice their craft before they swoop down on the unsuspecting public.



Figures 20-21

A metal band watch is slipped off the hand in the time it takes to say "Hello."



Figures 22-23

9

How Pickpockets Practice

Pickpocket is looking for people he can practice on once or twice a week. Will pay $5.00/hour...

The above advertisement was actually placed in a newspaper a few years ago, and the first response naturally came from the police. Actually the ad was placed by two magicians who wanted to incorporate a pickpocket routine into their act and needed practice on living models before performing on stage. Nevertheless, the police watched these men very carefully for weeks.

Although such a blatant advertisement will draw the attention of police, a living person is without question the best practice a pickpocket

can get. It shouldn't be terribly difficult to find, without resorting to a newspaper ad, unemployed people willing to stand and be "robbed" for four hours a day. The benefits of a live subject are many, but for the beginner pickpocket, the highest among them is the response factor. A living model can give the aspiring dip feedback on what he felt and where he felt it. The pickpocket can then adjust his techniques slightly, and practice them until he gets it right. To escape any suspicion, the professional [illegible] pickpocket will generally tell everyone that he is a stage magician and is working on a pickpocket routine (or may soon be a racetrack near you). The drawback of the live model besides his salary is his inevitable boredom with the whole affair. While it may be interesting the first couple of days, a person soon becomes tired of having a watch stolen from his wrist or a wallet taken from his pocket [illegible] times a day.

If the pickpocket cannot find or afford a live dummy, he can resort to the next best thing: a mannequin. Mannequins can be purchased from department stores and fitted with various combinations of clothing. After a pickpocket has mastered lifting from slacks, for example, he will fit the dummy with jeans and perfect that technique. The mannequin also helps to synchronize the pickpocket's movements, since he learns where his body and hands must be at all times. Obviously, the chief drawback of the mannequin is its complete lack of responsiveness, although efforts are occasionally made to address this problem.

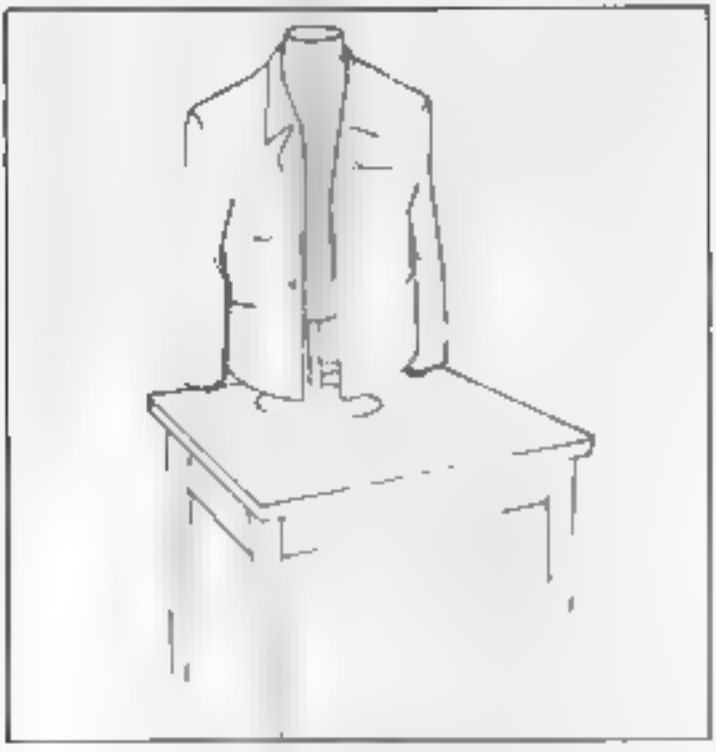


Figure 24

The torso of a mannequin is perfect for practicing coat pocket grabs

The Chicago Tribune carried a story recently detailing the discovery by the Italian Police of a "finishing school" in Naples that taught the fine art of pickpocketing. Inside the school, several fully clothed mannequins were equipped with an array of mousetraps, bells, and other gadgets to signify any clumsy mistake in the pupil's move

ments. Several more displayed watches on the arm, as the wrist of a mannequin is perfect for practicing the watch steal. A tailor's mannequin, the type that has only the upper torso on a platform, is also perfect for practicing the inner coat pocket steal, provided the mannequin is raised to an appropriate height (see Figure 24).

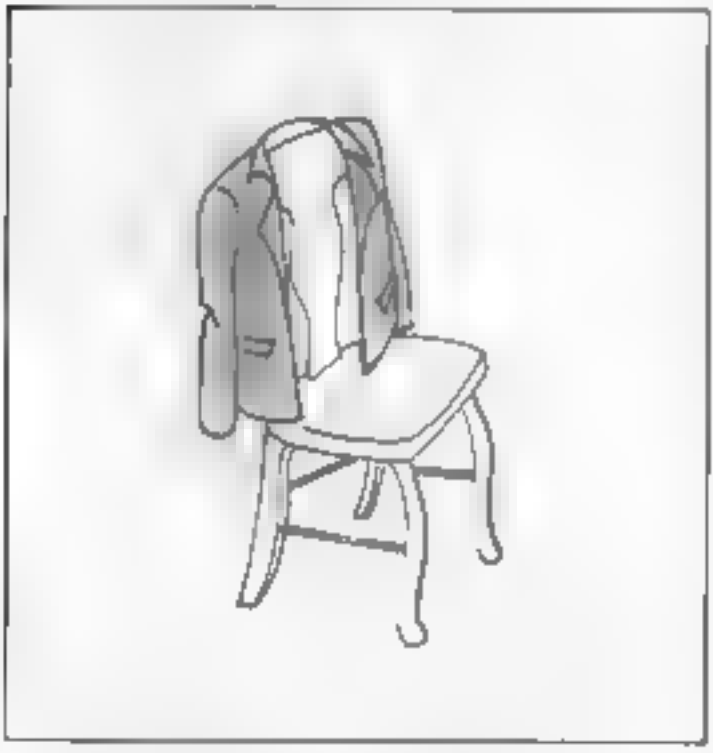


Figure 25

A coat thrown over the back of a chair makes an inexpensive practice tool.

The poverty-stricken pickpocket, who can afford neither the model nor mannequin can resort to a few cheaper devices. A coat thrown over a chair (see Figure 26), a pair of trousers filled with rags, or a pocket sewn onto a chair will all suffice for pickpocket practice. The arms of some chairs are also ideal for practicing watch lifts (see Figure 26). Although none of these practice techniques are aesthetically pleasing, they will certainly help the beginner until he can move on to bigger and better things. Furthermore, these less expensive suggestions allow those of us who are merely curious to gain insight into the actual demands of pickpocketing, without a large outlay of cash.

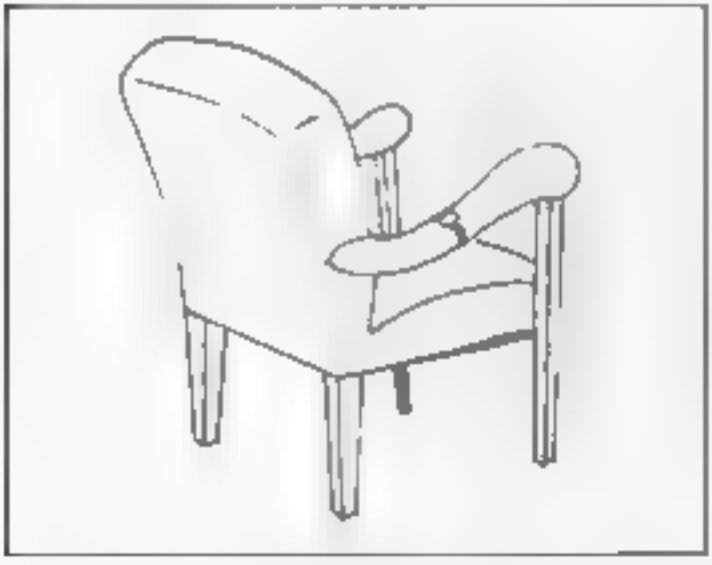


Figure 26

Watch lifts can be practiced on the arms of certain chairs.

Beginning pickpockets are generally very discouraged in the early goings of their career. They find their actions sloppy, their movements too studied, and their concentration easily diverted. But after the requisite practice and apprentice period, they notice their skills improving dramatically, and their confidence growing, and after two or three months of diligent practice they are usually ready to try their talents on living targets.

10

The Quick Hit Artist

One may ask why quick hit artists or purse snatchers as they're called, are included in a book about pickpockets. Well actually the pickpocket and the purse snatcher go about their business in much the same manner and usually the only difference between their methods is that the mark is immediately aware that he has been robbed after a "quick hit." While the pickpocket lifts wallets and the like by misdirection and finesse the quick hitter achieves the same goal by blatant physical force.

It does not take a great deal of imagination to realize how these guys ply their craft. They tear purses off old ladies' shoulders, they rip wallets out of a mark's pocket, and generally perform less-

than gracious acts that have prompted society to label them "muggers."

If the quick hit artists' actions were confined to such grotesque displays of violence, there would be no need for elaboration here on their methods. But many quick hitters have adopted some rather ingenious ploys that help them get the goods. For example, most purse snatching is done these days from the backs of motorcycles or scooters. And on such fashionable streets as the Champs d'Elysee, Via Veneto and Fifth Avenue, this activity is proliferating at an alarming rate. This prevents the victim's boyfriend or other bystander with heroic tendencies from chasing down the purse snatcher.

Another ploy is to cut the straps of the purse and make off with it before the lady notices it missing. A female purse snatcher may even go as far as to steal the purse while its owner is on the toilet in a public restroom. It is not unheard of for men to try the same thing on men and women.

Purses and wallets aren't the only things quick hitters are after these days. As I stated earlier, many of them carry wire cutters with them and will snip watch bands, rings and bracelets off a victim's wrist or fingers in a matter of seconds. Sometimes this does destroy the merchandise, but watch bands can be repaired and a ring's setting is rarely disturbed during the process. Therefore, even this crude attack is often very profitable. Money belts are also easily cut off, but this requires previous knowledge that the mark is transporting money in that manner.

If a mark is somewhat alone and the quick hitter risks little chance of being seen, he may resort to the very effective mace stun-gun trick. Using mace or other tear gas to temporarily blind the victim, and a stun gun to paralyze him, he can search for the valuables undisturbed, while his victim lies helplessly on the ground. Chloral hydrate, as we've seen earlier, is also very effective to achieve the same goals, although its effect is rather delayed.

Briefcases and suitcases are other popular targets of the quick hitter. He will position himself in airports, train terminals, and sometimes even in hotel lobbies, in hopes that he will get a chance at a case that contains valuables. As it is difficult to run very far or very fast carrying a large attache or suitcase, he will usually have a getaway vehicle waiting nearby.

11

Foiling the Pickpocket and Purse Snatcher

After reading the specifics of actual pickpocketing procedures, it should be easy to employ effective countermeasures against them. However, very often pickpockets are not only aware of our countermeasures, but they've invented counter-countermeasures of their own. The result then is that even after all our attempts at securing our goods against an attack, our money still gets taken.

First of all, there is no safe way to carry cash. It can be taken by the skilled pickpocket from every pocket, sock, chained wallet and money belt ever made. The safest way to carry currency or any other valuable papers, is to use one of those money pouches that slip around the neck, and

hide under the shirt. Also a few dollars in spending money should be kept in a pocket so that you don't have to go to the pouch to get money all the time. This is by no means foolproof since all one must do is slip the strap off your neck and pull it over your head, so never be seen taking money from the pouch in public.

On a trip of any length I would suggest travelers check in with the receipts kept in the bottom of your shoe with an additional list of the serial numbers and photocopies of the receipts kept in your hotel or car for good measure. And if you can keep from it, never take a wallet or purse to a beach and leave it unattended; that is inviting enough to people who aren't professionals, and simply irresistible for those who are. Also baggy pants with loose pockets are to be avoided, if at all possible.

If you suddenly find yourself in a situation where pickpockets abound, find some place that is secluded, and take the money out of your wallet. Put the cash and credit cards in your front pocket with your hand over them, and put the wallet back into the hip pocket. This way, even if you are singled out as a potential mark, you've given them a decoy, and you will probably escape with the good stuff.

Recognizing the favored situations of a pickpocket allows you to see if you are being set up for a boost. For example, if you find yourself suddenly crowded and pushed about, be on the ready for pickpockets, and turn around occasionally

Nothing scares the pickpocket more than a suspicious mark. Also, if you are wearing an expensive watch and someone offers you a left handed handshake, take it, but keep your eyes on his hands at all times. Of course, if it's an old friend offering a left hand, you can take it with confidence (unless you are wearing a really, really expensive watch).

Women would be well advised to leave their purses at home whenever possible and carry as little cash as they really need. If a purse must be carried, it should be carried as a fullback carries a football, and not held dangling by the straps. As an added precaution, the zipper should be held tightly against the body and closed, of course. It should be needless to say that one should never lay a purse down while shopping, but many do, and this accounts for a large share of purse thefts. On a trip, cash can be carried in a money belt, or in a garter type money pouch.

Anyone transporting valuables or large amounts of cash should invest in a security briefcase. There are several good brands on the market, and depending on the type, they will shriek, shock, or squirt tear gas, or all three, whenever an unauthorized person attempts to lift or open it.

Even though you take every precaution against it, the more adventurous or desperate pickpocket may attempt to steal your wallet or changepurse. If he is unsuccessful, and if you are aware of what has happened, you may be forced to confront the pickpocket with your accusations.

Of course, he will adamantly deny it, but try to get a good description of him, and report him to the nearest police. Don't be afraid to confront a pickpocket; they are almost never armed, and one is not likely to pull a gun or knife on you in a crowd.

If the pickpocket is successful and gets your loot, but you catch him immediately after the act, you can: (a) Beat him up and get your money back; (b) Tell him politely to give you your money back, or you will get the police; or (c) Do nothing. I can't tell you what you should do, because that depends on your character (and size), but I believe I would try to get my money back, if I thought I could.

It may sound as though we must keep constant vigilance on our wallets and purses to thwart the pickpocket and purse snatcher, but while it is a good idea to think about your money every now and then, there is no need to become absolutely paranoid about it. In everyday life, going to and from work, the store, the bank, and the doctor, etc., poses no real threat to the average person. The pickpocket will, of course, take what he can get, but he really prefers dense concentrations of people carrying large quantities of cash, rather than the average Joe going to the grocery store. Therefore, he follows automobile shows, conventions, major sporting events, and any other place where large crowds gather.

Once the pickpocket makes off successfully with the mark's wallet, he will usually keep the cash, the credit cards (which he sells for $100 apiece), and possibly the driver's license. The rest he will

discard, or toss into a mail box. The pickpocket may use the driver's license to perpetrate other crimes, and may even use it to charge small items (that won't be called in) on the credit cards. Another dangerous aspect of stolen I.D. is the fact that the pickpocket discovers the telephone number and address of the victim. Using this, he may call the victim at home, and say, "This is Lieutenant So-and-So, and we have recovered your wallet with your credit cards, etc. Can you come downtown to claim it?" And of course, as soon as the mark leaves to go to the police station, the pickpocket, or agents of the pickpocket, burglarize his home. Therefore, if your wallet is stolen, and you are called to come and claim it, call the police station first to verify the fact.

It is not easy to foil a pickpocket if he wants your money badly enough, but it is easy to deter him from singling you out as a mark. It should be noted that pickpockets are very selective when choosing a victim and will generally shy away from someone with self-confidence and poise, if they can have the sheepish-tourist type. By not looking with awe upon every large building, as if it were your first trip to the city, and by not wandering aimlessly through the streets, you will look less like an out-of-towner, and will begin to blend in with the surroundings. This, coupled with your new knowledge of the pickpocket's techniques, will dramatically improve your chances of escaping any city, with your money, valuables, and dignity intact.

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